

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Endangered Species Day – success and challenges

Good morning and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature. This week we're going to look at the recent Endangered Species Day celebration and the ongoing challenge to protect endangered species in the Southern Appalachians.

There weren't a lot of takers for snorkeling. It was the North Toe River, on Mitchell/Yancey County line and ten students from the local high school's Eco-Club were in the river with Fish & Wildlife Service biologists, looking for mussels. Snorkeling is the preferred way to search for mussels, as it gets you closer to stream bottom, where the mussels are often buried. However, it was May, and May in the mountains doesn't necessarily mean warm water, so people could be forgiven if they didn't want to submerge themselves.

The student's foray into the field was a celebration of Endangered Species Day, a holiday not quite on a par with Thanksgiving or Independence Day, but a day that nonetheless, brought these students out to experience a part of their own community they've never seen.

Endangered Species Day. Though it may not be widely celebrated, yet, that doesn't mean it isn't a good opportunity to reflect on the plight of endangered species here in the Southern Appalachians, and recent news hasn't been too encouraging. Ongoing problems with the town of Burnsville's waste-water treatment plant have likely had a dramatic impact on Appalachian elktoe mussels in the Cane River. The Southern Appalachians are home to the highest mountains in the east, and with them, a handful of rare plants found only on those mountain tops. These are cold, harsh areas, and the plants have adapted to those conditions, but global warming could spell the end of these habitats, and plants, as temperatures warm. However, there are glimmers of good news. One of the greatest threats to plants and wildlife in the Southern Appalachians, is unchecked, poorly managed development, and increasingly communities are becoming aware of the problems this causes, not only to plants and wildlife, but also burdens to infrastructure, and emergency services. In reaction, we're seeing more and more local efforts to get a handle on growth and do it as benignly as possible.

Back on the river, the hope for the day was finding an Appalachian elktoe mussel, an endangered mussel known from the Toe River. The biologists snorkeled in wet suits while students searched through view buckets, which are basically large buckets with a plexiglass bottom that work like giant face masks. It appeared we might end the day without seeing a single elktoe, but it was one of the students, a rising sophomore, that actually found the first one, near the river's bank, a find that was quickly followed by another elktoe discovery a few feet upstream. Two endangered animals, seen for the first time by handful of students who had grown up on these river banks. Hopefully it is a memory they will carry with them into adulthood.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.